AMH 4930:

American Disasters

Instructor: Dr. Joseph Spillane
Classroom: Keene-Flint 229
Class Meeting Times: Monday 4-6 (10:40-1:40)
Office Hours: Thursday 9:00-Noon and by appointment
Email: spillane@ufl.edu

About this Course

As the "Senior Seminar" this course is intended to offer you the opportunity to learn in more detail just what it is that historians do, and how they do it. It is both culmination and preparation. Like every Senior Seminar, the course is focused on a particular topic, in this case we consider "disasters" in modern United States (modern, defined for our purposes, meaning the 20th and 21st centuries). In the first nine weeks of the course, we'll use a variety of disasters to illustrate key concepts, from the 1904 *General Slocum* fire in Week One to the 1927 Mississippi River floods in Weeks Eight and Nine. No worries, though. If we don't cover a disaster of interest to you, no worries! You'll have the opportunity to prepare your own original research paper, which can address anything of interest to you (as long as it implicates disaster in modern U.S. history).

This is a very hands-on sort of course. Learning how to be a historian means doing history, from the ground up. We will learn about disaster, but we will also work on all the elements of sound historical practice and methods. So be prepared to regularly attend class and actively engage in the work!

Objectives

Students who successfully complete this course will be able to:

- Distinguish between different types of historical sources, take effective notes on any given source, and evaluate their utility for historical research.
- Use the resources of the UF Libraries to locate relevant historical sources for any given research topic.
- Ask effective historical research questions.
- Investigate the historiographical debates surrounding specific research topics.

- Prepare a research paper which displays proper understanding of formulating a research question, locating and documenting sources, and adherence to the conventions of writing in history.
- NOTE! Students who complete this course will also finish having learned a great deal about the modern United States, as well as disaster as a historical concept.

Readings

There is one text that absolutely must be purchased:
Susan Scott Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* (Princeton University Press, 2017). We will need this book for weeks Eight and Nine. You'll need a hard copy you can bring to class. Please make sure you have it then.

OPTIONAL: You may also want to purchase Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, 10th edition (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2020). The current edition of this textbook is the 10th edition. However, I find that any edition from the 5th edition forward is quite suitable for this course. Feel free to purchase an older edition, used copy, if you would like to save yourself some money. It can be very helpful.

ALSO OPTIONAL: The UF Library gives you electronic access to Zachary M. Schrag, *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research.* Schrag's book is a really thoughtful and interesting guide to conducting historical research. You might consider taking a look at the book online, through the UF Library site, and if there are chapters that sound useful, do feel free to consult them.

The remainder of the readings for the course are available electronically through the University of Florida Library, or online generally, and links to those readings will be available in Canvas for each week of the course. Please make sure you are engaging with the reading; that is key to what we are doing in the classroom and to your smaller assignments.

Assignments

The course assignments are organized in the following way:

Class Participation—50 points
JAH/Katrina Essay—20 Points
Primary Sources/Oral History Essay—20 points
The Flood Year 1927 Essay—20 Points
Oral Presentation—20 Points
Peer Evaluation Work—20 Points
Final Paper—150 Points
TOTAL POINTS: 300

Grading Scale
94-100%—A
90-93—A-minus
87-89—B-plus
84-86—B
80-83—B-minus
77-79—C-plus
74-76—C
70-73—C-minus
67-69—D-plus
64-66—D
60-63—D-minus
59 or below—E

Late Work and Make Up Work
No make-up assignments will be given except in cases of an excused absence as defined by UF's attendance policy – (https://catalog.ufl.edu/ugrad/current/regulations/info/attendance.aspx) or a documented emergency. Notification of an excused absence should be made **BEFORE** to the assignment's deadline and not days later. For an emergency, instructor notification should be made within 72 hours post-emergency event and not weeks later. Students should be prepared to document the reasons for the absence. Students whose absences are not excused will not normally be allowed to make up assignments.

Academic Integrity
Academic dishonesty is strictly prohibited. *Dishonesty includes cheating and plagiarism*. Cheating encompasses acts such as, but not limited to, collaborating with other students on the class assignments when not directed or collaborating with others or unauthorized materials during an exam.

Plagiarism involves acts such as, but not limited to, failing to cite sources properly in written work, using phrases taken from original sources without proper quotations and citations, submitting all or part of papers that have been submitted to another class either in the past or during this current semester, and attempting to pass off someone else's ideas as your own. *Plagiarism can occur in the absence of intent*; it is your responsibility to make sure that you do not copy words or ideas from anyone, or generated by anybody (or anything) besides yourself, either purposefully or inadvertently. Cheating or plagiarism will result in penalties. It might be a zero on the

assignment, an E in the class, or other disciplinary action. I may also elect to report academic dishonesty to the Dean of Students Office.

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge which states, "We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: "On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment." The Honor Code (https://www.dso.ufl.edu/sccr/process/student-conduct-honor-code/) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. Furthermore, you are obligated to report any condition that facilitates academic misconduct to appropriate personnel. If you have any questions or concerns, please consult me.

Extra Credit

This is a commonly asked question, so please know that I will under no circumstances provide a student with an individualized extra-credit assignment. I also do not use "incompletes" except in the event of genuine problems (usually occurring after the withdrawal deadline) that are valid excuses for being unable to finish coursework on time. Your grade in the class is based on your performance on the assignments and final paper. Please do not come to me at the end of the semester asking for "extra" points. It is your responsibility to check Canvas regularly and to always know your current grade.

Disability Access

Students with disabilities requesting accommodations should first register with the Disability Resource Center (352-392-8565, www.dso.ufl.edu/drc/) by providing appropriate documentation. Once registered, students will receive an accommodation letter which must be presented to the instructor when requesting accommodation. Students are required to meet with the instructor to discuss the appropriate accommodations required for the class. Just simply emailing the instructor your accommodation letter with no further discussion will not suffice. Students with disabilities should follow this procedure as early as possible in the semester. Additionally, if you were to experience an event during the semester that may require class accommodations, please reach out to the Disability Resource Center as soon as possible and provide me the documentation immediately following your visit, so that you are not delayed in receiving class accommodations.

Course Evaluation
Students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online via GatorEvals. Guidance on how to give feedback in a professional and respectful manner is available at https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/students/ . Students will be notified when the evaluation period opens and can complete evaluations through the email they receive from GatorEvals, in their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or via https://ufl.bluera.com/ufl/ . Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/public-results/ .

COURSE SCHEDULE

Note that more information for each week, including details on assignments and due dates, can be found on the course's Canvas page.

Week One (Monday, August 25)—Course Introduction—What is a "Disaster"?

This week, there are no substantial assigned readings, other than one blog entry (see below). Just come to class, and we will review the syllabus and course requirements. We will also begin our conversations about disasters, with a review of some basic terms and concepts. We will spend some time practicing thinking about disasters, starting with one specific disaster—the *General Slocum* fire of 1904. I'll distribute some relevant materials in class.

Required Reading: Ted Houghtaling, "Witness to Tragedy: The Sinking of the General Slocum," *From the Stacks* (blog), New York Historical Society, February 24, 2016, https://www.nyhistory.org/blogs/witness-to-tragedy-the-sinking-of-the-general-slocum

Week Two (Monday, September 8)—(Un)Natural Disasters/Hurricane Katrina and the *Journal of American History*

This week, we take a deep dive into the world of natural disasters. Our discussions this week center around articles from a special issue of the *Journal of American History*, "Through the Eye of Katrina: The Past as Prologue?"—published in December 2007, the issue appeared in print just two years after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in 2005. The issue was something of an experiment, offering historical perspectives on an event in near real-time. You'll be assigned a *JAH* article in Week One, and we'll present what we find this week. These are the JAH articles (you'll be assigned ONE of them):

"Through the Eye of Katrina: The Past as Prologue?"—specific articles from this special issue of the *Journal of American History* will be assigned Week One. These are the articles which will be randomly assigned Week One:

- Richard Campanella, "An Ethnic Geography of New Orleans"
- Karen Kingsley, "New Orleans Architecture: Building Renewal"
- Kent B. Germany, "The Politics of Poverty and History: Racial Inequality and the Long Prelude to Katrina"
- Donald E. DeVore, "Water in Sacred Places: Rebuilding Black Churches as Sites of Community Empowerment"

- Karen J. Leong, et. al., "Resilient History and the Rebuilding of a Community: The Vietnamese American Community in New Orleans East"
- Pamela Tyler, "The Post-Katrina, Semiseparate World of Gender Politics"
- Bruce Boyd Raeburn, "'They're Tyrin' to Wash Us Away': New Orleans Musicians Surviving Katrina"
- Marline Otte, "The Mourning After: Languages of Loss and Grief in Post-Katrina New Orleans"
- Juliette Landphair, "'The Forgotten People of New Orleans': Community, Vulnerability, and the Lower Ninth Ward"
- Lawrence N. Powell, "What Does American History Tell Us About Katrina and Vice Versa?"

***JAH*/Katrina Essay/Presentation Due Today**.

Required Readings:

- Eric Klinenberg, "Denaturalizing Disaster: A Social Autopsy of the 1995 Chicago Heat Wave," *Theory and Society* 28, no. 2 (April 1999): 239-295.
- Jonathan Bergman, "Disaster: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *History Compass* 6, no. 3 (2008): 934-946.
- Clarence L. Mohr and Lawrence N. Powell, "Through the Eye of Katrina: The Past as Prologue? An Introduction," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 3 (December 2007), 693-694.

Week Three (Monday, September 15)—Capturing the Experience of Disaster (Thoughts on Primary Sources)

As we'll see, there are many facets of historical disasters that invite historical inquiry. This week, however, we will investigate in more detail the challenges involved in capturing the lived experience of disasters by those directly involved. We'll use two "natural" disasters that occurred in California, more than a century apart. First, the earthquake and fire that destroyed much of San Francisco in 1906. Second, the Camp Fire which destroyed the town of Paradise in 2018 (we'll have watched a little bit of "Fire in Paradise" a 2019 PBS *Frontline* documentary already). **Primary Sources/Oral History Essay Due Today**.

Required Readings:

- Joanna L. Dyl, *Seismic City: An Environmental History of San Francisco's 1906 Earthquake* (University of Washington Press, 2017), Chapter One "Making Land, Making a City" (pages 33-63 and Chapter Two, "Catastrophe and Its Interpretation," pages 64-91.
- Patrick Rael, How to Read a Primary Source, https://courses.bowdoin.edu/writing-guides/

Week Four (Monday, September 22)—Recovery, Resilience, and Remembrance

We further expand our historical considerations this week, to cover three distinct (though interrelated) dimensions of disaster studies. The first is *recovery*—what do we mean by "recovery" and how to do we consider the experience of recovery historically? The second is *resilience*—an increasingly popular concept in social scientific and scientific research, what is useful and what is problematic about the use of the term for historians? Finally, the third term, *remembrance*, invites us to think about the ways disasters are understood in retrospect, about the kinds of stories we tell about them. We'll talk about Joanna Dyl's summary in Seismic City, and about the competing narratives Edward Linenthal found around the Oklahoma City bombing.

Required Readings:

- Joanna L. Dyl, *Seismic City: An Environmental History of San Francisco's 1906 Earthquake* (University of Washington Press, 2017), Conclusion (pages 253-262).
- Edward T. Linenthal, *The Unfinished Bombing: Oklahoma City in American Memory* (Oxford University Press, 2001), Chapter Two, "Telling the Story: Three Narratives."
- Yoav Di-Capua and Wendy Warren, "Genealogies and Critiques of Resilience," *American Historical Review* 129, no. 4 (December 2024): 1396-1400.

Week Five (Monday, September 29)—Slow Motion Disasters

We tend to think of a "disaster" as something, in terms of the hazard, that unfolds quickly—disasters like a sudden terrorist bombing an earthquake, a structure fire, all involve hazards that are over and done with remarkable swiftness (even if the prelude and aftermath stretch out for a long time). But what about disasters that unfold over longer periods of time? Can we rethink the temporality of disaster to make room for what some have called "slow motion" disasters? We'll read an introduction to the concept from the field of environmental history, and an interesting study from the field of drug abuse that asks whether the drug problems of Detroit could be considered a slow-motion disaster.

NOTE: We will meet in the regular classroom, briefly discuss the readings and concept, and then spend NOON to 1:40 over in Smathers Libraries Special Collections, looking at some primary source collections related to the "disaster" concept.

Required Readings:

- Fiona Williamson and Chris Courtney, "Disasters Fast and Slow: The Temporality of Hazards in Environmental History," *International Review of Environmental History* 4, no. 2 (2018): 5-11.
- Paul J. Draus, "Substance Abuse and Slow-Motion Disasters: The Case of Detroit," *The Sociological Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 360-382.

NOTE: For some good advice on research design, you can start with Rampolla, *Pocket Guide*, "Writing a Research Paper" and then you may ALSO wish to read Zachary M. Schrag, *The Princeton Guide to Historical Research*, Chapter Four "Research Design" (available from the UF libraries as an e-book, and locatable in the "Course Reserves" section of the course Canvas page). Schrag offers helpful guidance on defining the basic scope of your project, structure, periodization, geographic focus and historiographical considerations…all of which will come into play as you think about a research proposal.

Week Six (Monday, October 6)—Technology and Risk

This week we shall explore the questions of "risk" in modern society. We'll begin by discussing what we mean by risk, and considering the ways in which our ideas about risk are socially constructed and therefore historically contingent. Risk, in turn, leads to effort to mitigate that risk. Our example for the week is one notable example of risk mitigation—the widespread adoption of asbestos as a fire prevention tool in building construction in the 20th century. Although asbestos today is understood as a hazard in itself, Rachel Maines explains why it was adopted to try and prevent the far more immediate and substantial hazard of deadly building fires.

Required Readings:

- Rachel Maines, *Asbestos and Fire: Technological Trade-offs and the Body at Risk* (Rutgers University Press, 2005), pages 1-23, and 45-77. This is chapter 1 and 3 of the book.
- Arwen P. Mohun, "Constructing the History of Risk: Foundations, Tools, and Reasons Why," *Historical Social Research* 41, no. 1 (2016): 30-47.

Week Seven (Monday, October 13)—The State, Regulation, and the Dark Side of Organizations

If natural disasters are not as "natural" as they might first appear, the role of human action is even more obvious when it comes to various technological disasters. This week, we'll take a deeper look at two related questions for historians. First, how do we understand the organizational behavioral behind technological disasters? Diane Vaughn, who studied the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, reviews some models for thinking about these matters in her article "The Dark Side of Organizations." Second, once we understand the nature of these sorts of disasters, what do we do about them, after the fact? How do we hold anyone accountable? How to do think about developing policy to try and avoid similar recurrences of disaster? We've got two very different sorts of disasters to think about this week. In the first case we return to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of 1911 to examine how it prompted changes in the way law thought about theses kinds of disaster. Then, we think about on ongoing "slow motion" disaster of the 21st century, the problem of widespread opioid overdose. Scott Burris considers the question of how best for law and policy to respond.

Required Readings:

- Scott Burris, "Where Next for Opioids and the Law? Despair, Harm Reduction, Lawsuits, and Regulatory Reform," *Public Health Reports* 133, no. 1 (2018): 29-33.
- Diane Vaughn, "The Dark Side of Organizations: Mistake, Misconduct, and Disaster," *Annual Review of Sociology* 25 (1999): 271-305.
- Arthur F. McEvoy, "The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911: Social Change, Industrial Accidents, and the Evolution of Common-Sense Causality," *Law and Social Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 621-654

Week Eight (Monday, October 20)—Cultural Histories of Disaster, Part One

Disasters are cultural events. One was to think about this (and by this is something we'll have discussed as early as Week One of the course), is to pose the question "how do disasters become meaningful?" That's a question of central importance to Susan Scott Parrish, in her book The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History, and we'll spend the next two weeks examining all the ways in which that question can be considered. These two weeks will also be a good opportunity, as you advance in your research projects, to take a deep dive into how one historian organizes and presents her work.

Required Reading:

- Susan Scott Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* (Princeton University Press, 2017), pages 1-178.
- Ellen Wiley Todd, "Photojournalism, Visual Culture, and the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 2, no. 2 (2005): 9-28.

WEEK Nine (Monday, October 27)—Cultural Histories of Disaster, Part Two

Continued discussion of Parrish's work and writing cultural histories of disaster.

Required Reading:

- Susan Scott Parrish, *The Flood Year 1927: A Cultural History* (Princeton University Press, 2017), pages 181-290.

WEEK Ten (Monday, November 3)—Research Week, NO CLASS (Individual Meetings)

Time to get those research papers moving! No class this week, though I continue to encourage everyone to meet with me during office hours as needed, or to make a separate appointment to discuss the final papers.

Readings: NONE

Week Eleven (Monday, November 10)—Oral Presentations, Part One

This week is part one of our oral presentations of the work still in progress on your final research projects. We'll have time for half of the presentations this week. More details on the assignment in the Canvas page for the course.

Readings: NONE

Week Twelve (Monday, November 17)—Oral Presentations, Part Two

This week will feature the second half of the oral presentations of research projects.

Readings: NONE

Week Thirteen (Monday, November 24)—NO CLASS, THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week Fourteen (Monday, December 1)—Peer Reviews of Drafts (IN CLASS)

Week Fourteen will be taken up with an in-class peer review exercise, in which students will review the rough draft of another paper and discuss it with the author. More details on this assignment are to come.

FINAL RESEARCH PAPERS ARE DUE DECEMBER 10, by 5:00 PM.